A LINE IN THE SAND: PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES IN NURSING

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NIGHTINGALE PLEDGE
I will abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous… maintain and elevate the standard of my profession… will hold in confidence matters committed to my keeping… in the practice of my calling… and devote myself to the welfare of those committed to my care.

ANA CODE OF ETHICS
When acting within one’s role as a professional, the nurse recognizes and maintains boundaries that establish appropriate limits to relationships.
PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES ARE...

the spaces between the nurse's power and the client's vulnerability.
The establishment of boundaries is the responsibility of the professional, not the client.

RISK FACTORS
- Vulnerability of client
- Professional factors
- Opportunity

CONTINUUM OF PROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOR

National Council for State Boards of Nursing
UNDER INVOLVEMENT
- Distancing
- Disinterest
- Neglect

OVER INVOLVEMENT
- Boundary Crossing
- Boundary Violation
- Sexual Misconduct

BOUNDARY CROSSING
Brief excursion across a boundary with a return to the established limits of the professional relationship. May be intentional or inadvertent.
BOUNDARY VIOLATION

Characterized by

- Role reversal
- Secrecy
- Meeting of nurse’s needs rather than client’s

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

- Often begins with an inappropriate comment or a touch to test the waters
- Overt or covert expression of erotic or romantic thoughts/feelings/gestures
- Early detection is critical

TYPES OF SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

- Harassment
- Sneaky Sex
- Sex by Fraud
- Romantic involvement
- Rape/Sexual abuse
WHAT IF....

- Bonnie Blue, RN spends her day off running errands, cleaning house and preparing food for her home care clients, Mr. & Mrs. Higgins. They pay her a small hourly wage directly for this work.

  Boundary Crossing

WHAT IF....

- Patty Harper, LPN has been seen kissing Ben, a 26 year old quadriplegic patient. When asked about it she states he asked her to kiss him.

  Sexual Misconduct

WHAT IF....

- Leo Lime, RN needs help with his tax returns. He doesn’t understand the new tax laws. He asks his client, Ted Thompson, a CPA for assistance.

  Boundary Crossing
WHAT IF ...  

- Jon Thomas, LPN has been taking care of Paula, a 6 year old ventilator dependent girl, for the past 4 years. Paula’s parents think Jon is the best nurse Paula has. To express their appreciation they give Jon 2 tickets to the Super Bowl game.

  Boundary Violation

WHAT IF...  

- Olivia Orange, RN, CNS offers to give John Gilbert a ride home because it is raining and he doesn’t have an umbrella. John is a client at the diabetic clinic where Olivia works.

  Boundary Crossing

WHAT IF ....  

- Sheila Wells, RN took care of Paul Kemp while he was in the hospital. Paul always flirted with her. Three days after discharged, Paul called Sheila and asks her out on a date.

  Boundary Violation
COOLING-OFF PERIOD

The interval between the end of the professional relationship and the beginning of a business or personal relationship with the client.

WHO IS HARMED BY BOUNDARY CROSSING?

× CLIENT
  + Varies from embarrassment to depression, even suicide
  + Breach of trust is often more harmful that the act itself

× PROFESSIONAL
  + Loss of job
  + Disciplinary action by the Board of Nursing
  + Ruined career

WHO IS HARMED BY BOUNDARY CROSSING?

× PROFESSION
  + Negative publicity
  + Weaken the ethics of care
  + Altered perception of the profession

× PUBLIC
  + Erosion of confidence in the profession
  + Criminal offense
WARNING SIGNS
- Excessive self-disclosure
- Secretive behavior
- Super nurse behavior
- Singled-out client treatment
- Selective communication
- Flirtations
- Me and you against the world thinking
- Failure to protect the client

WHAT TO DO IF SUSPECT ....
- Consult with trusted supervisor
- Document incidents
- Be familiar with legal requirements for reporting to your Board of Nursing

CLIENT SAFETY MUST BE THE FIRST PRIORITY

PREVENTION
- Identify high risk situations
  - Isolated work environment
  - Lack of direct supervision
  - Long & intense nurse-client interactions
  - Client fear brought on by illness
ASK YOURSELF…..

- Whose need is being met by this intervention?
- Can I document this in the client’s record?
- Is this something I can openly and honestly discuss with a coworker or supervisor?

ASK YOURSELF…..

- Is this what other nurses do?
- Do I spend the same quality and quantity of time with other patients?
- Would I provide nursing service to other clients in this location?
- How does this look to others (peers, family, supervisors)

ASK YOURSELF…..

- Does the gift giving create a sense of obligation on the part of the recipient?
- Is the gift of a personal nature, given to one nurse or a general gift to a group of caregivers?
BEST PREVENTION IS:

- Be aware
- Be reflective
- Respect your “dis–ease”
- Keep your client’s needs paramount

ADDITIONAL TIPS

- Limit physical contact to that which is therapeutic
- Limit social contact to on-duty time
- Avoid financial/legal dealings
- Limit self-disclosure to superficial information
- Avoid making your patient’s problems your own

ADDITIONAL TIPS

- Never engage in communications with patients that could be interpreted as flirtatious or which employ sexual innuendos, off-color jokes, or offensive language
- Be aware of any feeling of sexual attraction to a client and NEVER act or discuss these with the client
Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries is everyone’s responsibility.

RIGHT OR WRONG?

- Giving/Receiving Gifts
- Accompanying a Client to a Movie
- Hugging a Client
- Loaning a Client Money
- Telling a Client About a Personal Experience

IF THERE IS EVER ANY BOUNDARY ISSUE...

TRANSFER THE CARE OF THE CLIENT TO ANOTHER COLLEAGUE
QUESTIONS

REFERENCES

- National Council of State Boards of Nursing. Professional boundaries: A nurses guide to the importance of appropriate professional boundaries.